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OKUMA AND THE NEW ERA IN JAPAN

BY WILLIAM ELLIOT GRIFFIS

THE best hated and the best loved man in the Japanese Empire has resigned the premiership, though still a leader of the people. According to the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, feudalism is dead, but the clan spirit is alive. No more than among the land-holding classes of England and Germany, has the feudal system been abolished in Japan. As in Russia, the bureaucracy in Nippon still holds the power. That ideal of the union of the throne and the nation, set forth in the revolution of 1868, is still far from complete.

The resignation of Okuma (October 2, 1916) marks the end of an era. Of the original half hundred or so re-creators of Japan, who put the "Charter Oath" into the mouth of the boy-emperor Mutsuhito, who lived until 1912, but four remain. These *Genro*, or Elder Statesmen, despite Constitution, Diet, parties, or nobility, have virtually dictated for nigh fifty years the policy of the new Japan.

From this time forth, a new element enters into the executive branch of the Mikado's Government. With faint memories of feudalism, or none; educated abroad; and with mental habits wholly modern, the bolder policy of the future premiers will be in the line of national expansion. Especially in the relations with Japan's nearest neighbors—China, Russia, and the United States—will vigor and justice, from the native point of view, be looked for. Japan is the middle term between Orient and Occident, and the world must know it. This is the meaning of party contention in the Diet, of recent native literature, and of diplomatic and military activities on the Asian mainland. It is these latter that have so disturbed some American writers and multiplied their books and deliverances through voice and pen.

Auspiciously for Americans, the new premier, Terauchi, is looked upon in Japan—as was also the late premier Katsura—as loyal son, promising pupil, and approved successor of Prince Yamagata, born in 1838, and still a power in politics behind the throne. It was Yamagata who carried through several friendly arrangements with the Government of the United States, including the “gentleman’s agreement.” Terauchi’s record in Korea—despite the unsavory history and limping conclusion of a certain judicial process, for which he is hardly responsible—is, all things considered, fully equal in efficiency and justice to that of Lord Cromer in Egypt or of Lord Curzon in India.

In considering Okuma’s career, the key to it is found in his faith in the power of education. He has ever urged the duty of society to afford equal opportunity to both man and woman. Opportunism has been the chronic object of his hostile contempt. For long views of statecraft he believed in a university rather than an electioneering canvass, even though he has gone on speech-making tours in palace cars. He has ever believed in sending a root downward, as well as a branch upward. Ever contending for the national ideal, none can better express in word and life what that ideal is. His acceptance of the best culture, handed down from the ancients, is as sincere and thorough as is his hospitality to foreign thought.

This patent fact puzzles one who is merely alien, partisan or nationalist, for Okuma has the international mind. When his was a voice crying in the wilderness, and military strength was supposed to be the nation’s only salvation, he urged the elevation of woman as the nation’s safeguard. In this, he was the truest of patriots. It is not “belated Rousseauism” to assert for the daughters of Japan equal right and heritage in national honors, for the page of history is too manifestly open. Confucian notions, crusted into routine, when introduced in Japan, distinctly lowered the status of woman from her high place in ancient Yamato.

The animus and motor of Japan’s modern transformation are missed if these facts are forgotten, for no other Japanese has so incarnated all, and not merely a few, of the forces, new and old. Okuma is not veneered or varnished with imported modernism, but is a Japanese of the Japanese. He knows his nation’s record. He acts from inherited and not exotic principles. One familiar with his early life can-

not doubt the sincerity of his oft-repeated profession that, even while confessing vast debt to American friends and teachers, he is still supremely loyal to Emperor and country. His first political study was the Constitution of the United States, and he was a "Mikado reverencer," when that term was the battle cry of those looking forward to a new national life.

The printed accounts of Okuma's formative period appear to be copied one from the other. The author of this article, familiar with the letters of Okuma's teacher, Dr. Verbeck, from 1859, and knowing Okuma in the early seventies, sees not change, as of a cloud, but growth as of a tree. There is visible none of that fickleness vulgarly supposed to mark the typical Japanese. The time for considering the Japanese as funny little human curiosities has gone. The day for serious study of them, as well as—if so be—of discernment of menace and of malignant misrepresentation, has come.

The biographies and reference books, now in many lands, tell us that Okuma went to Nagasaki and came under the influence of "some Englishmen"—that is, the American missionaries there, whose names we know; but the alleged plurality centers in Guido Fridolin Verbeck, born in Holland, who used freely French, German, English, and Dutch, and was conversant with three classic languages. From New York he reached Nagasaki in 1859, after a voyage of 127 days, almost on the day that the Townsend Harris treaty would allow alien residence. In his letters home, we read that two of his first and most promising pupils were Soyéshima and Okuma, whom he was instructing in two immortal documents, the New Testament and the Constitution of the United States. In a word, Okuma, in 1860, was one of the first to turn away from what was merely odd and quaint in the "hairy foreigners," to discern the underlying principles of their civilization. In 1916 he has probably no living superior as a student of realities among nations and races.

After Nagasaki, teacher and scholar, the man of cosmopolitan mind and the star pupil, were destined to remain neighbors and friends for many years. Summoned in 1869 to Tokyo, to inaugurate Japan's national scheme of education, to start a host of students abroad, to call out from home an army of foreign experts, to dictate the language of medicine and law, Verbeck, in many a masterly, original

writing, initiated the young statesman into the modern mysteries—of freedom of the press and of conscience, of lay trustees for church property, and in details of international usage. Many a “state paper” I have seen is pencilled “Offered to Okuma,” on such a date, and “Discussed with Okuma,” on another. Okuma was the channel through which the new ideas poured easily into the brain of the older and less enlightened of the builders of the new nation.

It is often asked, “Is Okuma a Christian?” Though the ex-premier has never worn the regimentals of the Occidental Christ, yet all his actions and sympathies, and his boldest public expressions, show that he strives to follow closely the Samurai of the Ages. Perhaps, like others, he waits to see the savagery of civilization eliminated from Christianity, notwithstanding that a greater than he declared that the tares, once in the field, must grow with the wheat to the end of the world. In ethical and personal purity, his private life has been a wholesome contrast with that of certain colleagues, who have openly defied the moralities; while in ferreting out the abundant Japanese scoundrelism in high places, none has excelled this believer in clean poverty.

We remember well, at Tokyo in 1873, Okuma’s manifesto against official peculation and the antiquated and slovenly processes of government finance. This was when a forest of swords, equalling any in fairy tales, was a daily reality. Those of us who lived among the still hot passions of feudalism, and to whom the assassination of a cabinet minister was rather an ordinary bit of news, trembled for the safety of both Okuma and Shibusawa; yet both these oft-threatened men, still living, are likely to die in their beds. Okuma’s protest, with later achievements, gave Japan a standing in the world’s money markets, while his later investigations helped not only to fill the jails with guests of rank and position, but put whole armies of their followers to flight. Flinging away his sword and challenging many an old tradition and custom, Okuma pressed on. Christian or not, he could rebuke the fool’s imputation of “coward” when he not only forgave, but in later years made a pilgrimage to the grave of his would-be murderer and laid a wreath upon his tomb. The enlightenment of ignorance, the removal of prejudice—a passion with Okuma—seemed to him greater victories than those that crimsoned fields or made the sea to bubble with sinking ships. He leaves office now,

because of a battle not lost, but with its full issue only postponed. His cure for war and other indecencies of civilization is more education, or, as an American would say, more democracy. In his view more liberty means more solidity. A solid basis of education means national permanence.

Such inherent convictions, early formed, seem to me to solve the alleged enigma in Okuma's character, of which certain recent publications of foreigners, octavo and duodecimo, make so much, even charging that as Premier he became turncoat and renegade. Yet if there be a *volte-face*, as it is charged, in this man ever loyal to his sovereign, it must be in the minds of aliens who take their cue from native critics of the other party. I have never seen it. If to carry out his policies of protecting the people and the hopes of democracy—shall we use that term?—Okuma has invoked the potencies of Mikadoism and the throne, what is that but turning his enemies' guns upon themselves? It is no new trick in politics—to beat the foe with his own weapons. We all know how Dr. Johnson, with his eye on men that had their price, defined patriotism. If anything is clear, in the history of modern Japan, it is that Mikadoism has been made the same "last refuge." In Tokyo of the twentieth century, as in London of the eighteenth, it lies too often on the bargain counter.

Okuma, as I remember, was in 1871 as genuine an upholder of the throne as the foundation of Japan's unity as he is now. When in that year I first met him in Tokyo, he was Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs. My three years' educational contract with the great daimio of Echizen referred to the "Government" of the chief city where I was to organize a school of science and languages. The feudal system was still in force. Okuma's quick eye, sharpened by jealousy for the Mikado's honor and the Imperial prerogative, at once ordered the document to be recast, and the words "local authorities" substituted for a phrase which should be reserved solely to designate the sovereignty of the Empire.

This incident sufficiently explains the whole career of Okuma Shigénobu, with which his actions, as Premier, from April, 1914, to October, 1916, are in no way inconsistent. Moreover, ordinary perspective protects one from rumors and falsehoods. His record, when scrutinized, shows unwavering adherence to principles which his predecessors

have not always emphasized, even though Okuma's acceptance, as a native, of Japan's nursery tales as "history," and his low opinion of the Chinese, can hardly be shared by the critical mind of an alien.

Okuma's passion has been Japan—to make her great at home and to extend her influence in Asia and the world. Yet his methods have been those of the statesman, not the politician. Unless he be a consummate hypocrite—there is no other alternative—he lives and labors that his country, standing as the interpreter of the East to the West and the West to the East, may help notably to solve humanity's great, perhaps greatest problem: the union and reconciliation of East and West.

It is perhaps less important to give (in naval language) Okuma's "detail," than to attempt to fathom, if possible, the meaning of parties and policies; yet so far a "party" in Japan, whatever its name, means primarily a personal following. Our main present anxiety is Japan's political morality, the purpose and significance for the future of the recent change. A statesman supposed to be a pacifist and a believer in government by party has stepped out, and another, of alleged clan instincts and inheritances, a military man believing in government above and apart from parties and backed by the warlike Elder Statesmen, has stepped in. Is this a relapse, a halt in the evolution of constitutional government? How will the change affect the interests of the United States in the Far East?

Nominally Japan abolished feudalism; but half a million feudal retainers in Japan did not lose their grip upon the Government. Despite constitutions, Diets, and "gifts" of the Emperor, the men of the sword still rule Japan, and militarism crushes the people with outrageous taxation. The feudal system is re-entrenched in bureaucracy, so long assaulted by the ex-Premier, for of opposition to this clan spirit Okuma is the incarnation.

Okuma, after serving eight years as head of the Treasury, left his post because his colleagues in power rejected his memorial pleading for responsible government. He was disappointed that the Emperor had not kept, in letter or spirit, his "Charter Oath" to form a national assembly. On the contrary, Ito and others seemed more and more enamored of the Prussian, as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon, idea of making the ministers responsible to the Diet instead of to

“the Sovereign”; which latter, to the American mind, means the supremacy of the impenetrable secrecy of the Palace and the intrenched power of the ring of politicians surrounding the Mikado.

Seen in the perspective of over forty years, Japanese popular education has been swamped in militarism. Japan's once splendid scheme of a university in each of the eight great divisions of the empire has come very close to disgraceful failure. Academic freedom is yet far from a reality. Labor has not been honored. Military glory has been transfigured and war-making honored beyond its deserts, while against money-grubbing, at the expense of health and life, there is scarce protection by law. The fighter is still esteemed above the inventor, healer or artisan. The manifest result is, that Japan is still curiously deficient in high grade machinists, in intelligent mechanics, and in the finer lines of the newer industries. She is far from being able to compete in the more elaborate machinery or products, while her statutes for the protection of the factory laborer are weak apologies for what they should be.

Against the intrenchment of clan-politics in the Government—the old feudalism now pretty much the same in spirit, even when baptized “Imperialism”—Okuma has ever fought persistently and with valor. In 1888, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, he was maimed by a dynamite bomb that was carried, hidden in an umbrella, by a partisan clothed in the evening dress of Occidental civilization. Thus, without going to war, Okuma lost a limb. When, in 1889, the promised Constitution came forth, after being deferred during twenty-one years—“the gift of the Emperor,” but made in secret by a conclave headed by the Prussianized Ito—it scarcely disappointed the forewarned Okuma and Itagaki, when they found it defective in a vital feature: namely, the ministers were responsible only to “the Emperor.”

Nevertheless, these two men, who for thirty years had fought the Satsuma-Choshu-Tosa clan combination, then in possession of the Government, tried honestly, in 1898, to form a coalition ministry. They quickly realized, like their predecessors, that the time for parties founded on principles, rather than upon instincts and persons, had not yet come. The passionate instincts of clanship were too strong in the men of a nation in whom the long training of the English-speaking race was lacking. So this many-sided man re-

signed to carry out his educational plans, founding in 1882 the Waseda University, the largest and possibly the best of Japan's higher private schools, with its four thousand students. In this and in the Diet, Okuma showed a master-hand in rivalry and opposition. In none of the arbitrary measures (carried out, of course, in the name of "the Emperor") did any ministry in power dare to imprison their outspoken critic, Okuma, as they had done so often in the case of others. The Tolstoi of Japan was unharmed; for neither honest nor dishonest men, dressed in brief authority, dared, because of the people, to show too rough a hand. The worst thing about Okuma's criticisms was that they were true, even though not according to traditional etiquette.

Summoned in April, 1914, at seventy-six, following an appalling revelation of graft, Okuma left leisure to take the helm of state, in the year of the collapse of European civilization. The bureaucrats and the war party wanted, not only to eliminate Germany from the East, but to humble China and compromise her sovereignty. This was done with mixed motives, among others, that of getting possession of the iron mines, in which Japan is so deficient. She needs steel badly and is compelled to import seventy-five per cent. of her metals. There were no original Japanese methods to be used. The simple imitation of England, Russia and France would secure what was aimed at. In a word, Japan simply followed the order of "civilization." But whatever was done—and the misinterpretation in American newspapers was great—Okuma was, throughout, the restraining force, and it would be absurd to hold him responsible for the bellicose action of his country when the gravamen of his opponents' charge is his lack of a firm policy. Their demand for a premier of military mind shows what is in the air.

Okuma has ever tried to show to his countrymen the justice of American complaints, without ever yielding for one moment to the idea that the capital of the United States is anywhere else than in Washington, D. C., or that a treaty made with our Government can be set aside by one of the States.

If, as some fear, the clan spirit, bureaucracy and militarism are now for the time triumphant in Japan over constitutionalism, what then are the prospects for the "open door" and American interests in the Far East?

It would be against all precedents of nature and history

to expect an island race, with an expanding population, rich in reserves of power and with energies long stored up but liberated in a time of supreme opportunity, to remain quiescent, or to obey foreign dictation. No more than England, will Japan consent to being insularly "cribbed, cabined and confined." Moreover, the thinking world has had enough of that false and misleading notion (responsible for so many mistakes in diplomacy and in world politics) concerning "the unchanging East" and "the Oriental calm." The "Oriental" of conventional Occidental notions is pure legend.

Several books recently published in America and written in a spirit hostile to Japan, contain outrageous misstatements and interpretations of events possible only to partisans. They seem to have amply demonstrated, however, that the chief dangers to American interests on the Asian continent lie in our commercial carelessness, or our refusal to study the needs of the markets, or in that lack of enterprise which makes us inferior to our competitors. Not a few of these diatribes read like the complaints of disappointed commercial travellers, who wanted the United States Government to back their schemes. Even supposing that the bureaucrats and military party have for a time captured Japan, I see in this no more of a menace to the United States than a Japanese would find in the vote of our Congress to enlarge armaments under the Stars and Stripes.

No true lover of his race, or of righteousness, can condemn the Japanese for claiming from our Government strict fulfillment of treaty stipulations. Nor is their demand for social justice and recognition of the merits of their civilization aught but just. The encourager of race hatred is the real enemy, both of the United States and of mankind.

It is in the area of mutual rivalry and economic invasion of the unexploited territory of Asia that the real danger lies. Here, at the front of and beyond the threshold of the "open door," there is a real peril. Yet the men who believe in the inherent superiority and ultimate supremacy of moral potencies over physical forces—of which belief, Okuma stands as the embodiment—are firm in their conviction that genuine statesmanship, as earnest as it is sincere, can not only ward off all danger, but can ally Japan with America in a new union of forces for mutual good.

To Japan's new premier, Terauchi, we need extend only

a cordial welcome. His record of just government in Korea belongs among the records of high statesmanship. Long desired in Japan as a national leader, he is reasonably sure to follow the policy of neighborliness toward the United States as Japan's best friend. Moreover, in intellect, methods and sympathies, Terauchi is, in reputation at least, a sort of double to the venerable Yamagata, who has repeatedly shown himself America's constant friend. While Okuma and Yamagata were never close in sympathies or in methods of domestic statecraft, they have run the same course as agreed rivals in persistently claiming, often against jingoism, that the United States is Japan's best friend. So, without misgivings, we draw an augury from the name Terauchi: "Inside the Temple"—the temple, shall we not say, of peace?

In brief, here is a unique opportunity offered to the United States and Japan for mutual benefit and advancement of the race. To extend America's influence and prosperity in Asia, we shall find no better friend and helper than Japan. In the light, therefore, of fifty years' knowledge of the Japanese, I utter my faith that they will be loyal to the letter and to the spirit of every treaty which they have made with us; yes, even more, that they will co-operate with us in extending enterprise and commerce in Asia; and I, with millions of my countrymen, accept in its full meaning the message of Okuma which, as Premier, he sent in 1914 to the American people: "We Japanese, standing at the point where the Eastern and Western civilizations meet, are given facilities to serve as interpreters of the Orient and to represent the former before Occidentals.....Free from any racial or religious prejudices, we have collected, or are trying to collect, what is good, what is true, what is beautiful, from all corners of the earth."

In the same quest, may God speed us both.

WILLIAM ELLIOT GRIFFIS.